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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the observations of an international college student with an upper socio-economic background from Kenya who, prior to graduate work in the United States, had almost no contact with people with physical disabilities. The paper explores the construction of accessibility and disability on a college campus as viewed from a semiotic perspective through a research project that was conducted with a student with physical disabilities who used a motorized wheel chair. The paper contrasts an initial reaction to the freedom of accessibility the person with disability appears to have in the United States with the reality of a case study of a wheel-chair confined student. The commentary considers how signs of accessibility (such as the ramp sign) operate at three levels: (1) the iconic (signifying access or a way in/out); (2) indexical (as a marker of a society accessible by all citizens, even those with disabilities); and (3) symbolic (as a representation of freedom of movement, convenience, and inclusion). At this third symbolic level, the paper suggests that the ramp, when inconveniently though legally located, represents confinement, inconvenience, restriction of freedom, and a sense of censored access. The paper also examines ways that a person can be "dis-abled" by a culture through denial of a person's abilities or "enabled" and empowered. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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THE SEMIOTICS OF ACCESSIBILITY AND THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF DISABILITY

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Abstract

This paper draws from a case study of a college student from Africa with physical disabilities. The paper explores the construction of accessibility and disability. Viewed from a semiotic perspective, the signs of accessibility are seen to operate at three levels - the iconic, indexical and the symbolic. The meaning-making is constrained or enhanced based upon the level at which the sign is operating. The paper explores the ramp as a sign of access for persons with disabilities and further examines the manner in which the presence or absence of the ramp serves to facilitate access for persons with disabilities. Additionally, this paper inquires into the cultural construction of disability and explores ways in which a person can be "dis-abled" or "enabled" by a culture. (Parenthetical terms are used intentionally- "dis-able" used to denote practices that deny a person's ability; "enabled" taken to mean cultural practices or elements that empower or foreground an individual's abilities)

Introduction

I feel it is necessary to mention the lens through which I am looking at this issue. I am an international student from Kenya. I was born and raised in Kenya . I did all my schooling there up to the bachelors level. I attended boarding schools for the majority of my school career. The schools I attended were mostly girls' schools and most of the students that were in school with me came from a similar socio-economic background. I had minimal exposure to persons with disabilities except for the occasional trip to a school for children who were deaf or on a rare Friday evening, when we would go out to perform community work. However, even then, our contact with the children was minimal. Quite frankly, the motivation to participate in this service, for many of us, lay in the fact that the boys from a nearby exclusive boys' school also participated in the activity. Growing up, therefore, I had little contact with persons with any disabilities and, therefore, had no knowlèdge about their needs.

Within my world, as described above, persons with disabilities stood on the fringes. There were numerous stereotypes and locks and barriers that kept them out of that world. Within that world also, people with disabilities were invisible-yet, paradoxically, extremely visible: they are there, right in your face with their hands out-stretched, begging, yet you still don't "see" them. Within my world, people with disabilities are "not seen"...no provisions, or very few provisions are made in the public environment to accommodate them. The inquiry into disability is necessarily embedded in the discourse of the construction of self and the body. McCarthy (1996) argues the self and the body are cultural formations: as cultural objects, subject to extensive and diverse cultural practices. The same body, therefore, placed in a different cultural context could become enabled

or disabled based on the social and cultural construction of ability and/or disability (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

Although everyday language of knowledge and understanding are permeated by visual metaphors (Potter, 1996), what is observed is affected by cultural expectations that mediate the categorization of what is seen. Coming here, I am ever aware and conscious of the proportion of the American population that happens to have disabilities. In the parking lot, spaces are reserved for them, on walkways, there are ramps, phones are little lower, bathrooms are little wider, ...the list is endless. This is a portion of the population that one is unlikely to forget! Here their presence, even, in absentia, is mammoth! In the world I grew up, the presence of people with disabilities is nonexistent, not even when they are right in your face.

Keeping the image of where I came from in mind, you understand why initially I was in complete awe at how accessible this country is, specifically how accessible the campus is. I knew people complained about inaccessibility on campus, but when you come from where I am from, this country becomes the model of accessibility. Those being the lenses through which I viewed accessibility, they admittedly affected the manner in which I framed its meaning and the perspective I took on it. However, the more enmeshed in the project I became, the more I begun to learn different ways of viewing, understanding and constructing what I was observing. The consequence of abandoning my initial interpretation of my observations undermined the idea that observation provides a conclusive foundation for knowledge (Potter, 1996).

The Cultural Construction of Disability

> ... at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception is an interpretative structure mediated and sustained by signs. Deely, J. (1990) p. 5.

I was involved in a research project with a student with physical disabilities that necessitated his use of a motorized wheel chair. One of the aspects of this study was to observe the participant. The participant (whom I will call J) and I spent many a morning and afternoon together during the study. I followed him to wherever he was going and over several participant observations, I was not quite certain of what I was supposed to be "seeing". Staunchly believing that observation offers unmediated access to the world and its features (Potter, 1996; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), I hang in there. Soon, as the more time I spent with J, the more I began to "see". Potter (1996) would explain the trouble I was initially having with "seeing" as having nothing to do with failing to see what was before my eyes, but as failing to see what was before my eyes as something, or what Heidegger (1997) refers to as "...appearance as appearance of something" p. 25). Without delving into irrelevant tangents of my new-improved vision, I would just like to explore the aspects of this newly acquired vision as it relates to accessibility.

In my world, as described , J would have been completely handicapped (dis-abled). He would have been dependent: relying on people to push him from one place to another, or just confined to a very limited space where he could successfully move around independently. Initially, I was constantly amazed at how many places we could go together and how many spaces we could share. However, as we spent more and more time together, I began to rethink the meaning of and reconstruct accessibility. As we walked across campus, we were confined to a specific course. The location of ramps dictated where we could cross the street, and once safely across, where we would walk on the sidewalks, and exactly where we could cross at the next intersection. The paradox of accessibility became a fascination for me. Accessibility became extremely irksome especially when

we ran into friends who happened to be across the street, but we could not cross over and speak with them without having to follow the sidewalk to the next ramp. Spontaneity and accessibility make strange bedfellows! Ad hoc decisions about where to go were always tempered by the question of accessibility. Even just walking across the street directly opposite entailed having to follow a course prescribed by the position of the ramp!

Semiotics of Accessibility: The Ramp as a Sign

The ramp become an important sign that I was constantly in search of. Even when I was not in J's company, I was aware when the ramp was absent. Of my pre-occupation with the search meaning of the absence of the ramp as a symbol of access Potter (1996) and Bowie (1997) would explain it as an attempt at uncovering and understanding the underlying system that gives signs (e.g. linguistic signs) their full sense. This system is realized through the whole set of possible meanings, never apparent in one utterance. Saussure's perspective on signifiers and the signifeds, although different from Pierce's trichotomy, (Sebeok, 1977), is primarily concerned with understanding what is not present.

Based on Pierce's trichotomy of signs, the ramp as a sign of accessibility can be viewed from three levels. At the level of firstness, the ramp is iconic, signifying access or a way in/out. At the level of secondness, the ramp is becomes an indexical marker of a society that is accessible by all its citizens, even those with disabilities. In that, the ramp offers them access to areas that if there was no ramp, they would not be able to get to without depending on other people to get them there. At this level, the ramp becomes an indexical marker of accessibility. At the level of thirdness, the ramp becomes a symbolic representation of the freedom of movement, convenience, and inclusion.

It is at this level, that I learned to reinterpret the meaning of the ramp. At this level, I began to see the ramp as symbolically representing confinement, inconvenience, restriction of freedom, and a sense of censored access. What I mean is that the position of the ramp pre-determines one's route. If one is going a certain direction in a wheelchair, the location of that ramp pre-determines: where to cross the street, whether or not you are ready; where and when to enter a building; and in some cases, the location of the ramp may even determine the direction you have to go! - regardless of what direction you intend to go!

To substantiate what I mean by the ramp pre-determining what direction you have to go and when you can enter a building, I will use an excerpt from a day with J. On one of my participant observations, I accompanied J as he walked to class. There are two entrances to the building in question. On this particular day, it was snowing and quite chilly. The answer to the question of when we would have liked to be inside the building is, as soon as possible, given the weather condition. However, given the dictums of accessibility, this was not to be.

Students could be seen ducking into the building through the side entrance. From the direction we were coming, the side entrance would have been the convenient choice. However, that particular entrance was inaccessible. The main entrance bespoke of elaborate inaccessibility. There were several steps that one had to climb to get to the main entrance and, consequently, that was out of the question. The ramp was located in the rear of the building. To get there exemplifies what I mean by ramps determining the direction from which you can enter a building. To get into this building, J and I had to go past the entrances I just mentioned, walk around the building to the rear (which incidentally is the exact opposite from the room that he needed to get to). To successfully

maneuver through this obstacle course, one had to adhere to the prescribed course of the sidewalk that led around and away from the building and then finally to the ramp. The ramp led to a heavy manual metal door that required one to yank it open and as soon as it gave , deftly move the wheelchair and station it in a way to prop it open. Needless to say, since this door is metal, it is susceptible to freezing shut in the winter. Once safely inside, you found yourself in a murky basement amongst huge boilers and plumbing, and an old rickety elevator. The old rickety elevator's push button, like the door handle, was a tad too high for someone in a wheel chair. However, having successfully gained "access" into the building, the old rickety elevator, creaking and groaning, spits you out allowing you to emerge from the bowels of the building into the well-lit rooms on the first floor. Phew!... You sigh with relief from the exhaustion and uncross your fingers and hope the faithful elevator will be functioning on your way back out and that outer door has not frozen shut, and if so, you will be fortunate to enough to run into a delivery person in the docking area...the only other people that use this "accessible" entrance.... or that your wheel chair battery is charged enough that you can ram the door open- giving you a running start! Ostensibly, this building is accessible per ADA regulations.

This horrifying experience had me thinking about the implications of access to building social relationships. Most students meet and establish friendships through the people that they see in class. In J's case, I think the classroom becomes a very important arena for meeting people. However, given the backdrop of what it entails to get around with J, it would really take a patient person to be willing to go take the "accessible" route just to chit-chat on the way to class or to go for a cup of coffee after class.

The positioning of ramps was not based on the convenience of the people that need to use them. I dare say the construction and especially their location was not decided upon in consultation with people who use wheelchairs. Ramps seem to be built where it was easiest to build one without incurring too much expense or causing too much inconvenience. I highly doubt that a person in a wheelchair would have selected the rear of a building, away from all the other entrances, as the place for a ramp. The position of the ramp becomes a disincentive for the development of social companionship.

J and I spent a lot of time in the student center. The student center could be seen as the most access-empowering building. In lieu of a ramp, there are human facilitators of access: people were always entering or exiting the building. In that environment, ramps lost their great significance as the only way to gain access into the building. Access could be facilitated by people. Without calling too much attention to one's inability to open doors, one could rely on social conventions that dictate that if there is someone right behind you, you are expected to hold open the door, whether or not that person has a disability.

Signs of access on the level of thirdness can become symbolic representations of disability. I became struck by the obvious choice made by J for us to use entrances into the student center that did not have the "big PUSH switch" ... a symbolic marker of disability. J preferred to use the side entrance which was accessible by wheelchair through utilizing human facilitators. This was possible because the social convention I mentioned earlier was in effect.

At this level of thirdness, I began to notice that the ramp and the "big PUSH switch" had become an over-determined sign. Hodge & Kress (1988), criticize Suassure's dogmatic assertion

that signs are all and equally arbitrarily offering instead two levels of understanding signs- opaque or transparent signs. The connection between the transparent sign and the signified is easily seen by the user. People without disabilities generally tended to avoid those entrances that had a ramp or a door with an electronic opening device. It is was though an unwritten law was in effect that stated that those entrances were to be used by persons with disabilities and no one else! People tended to frown when this unwritten code was violated.

At another level, ramps and other markers of access such as the "big PUSH switch"can be seen as indices of degrees of restrictiveness. This allows access to be seen along a continuum: ranging from most to least, and in some cases, total restrictiveness. On another level, one then can ask questions like where do we allow people in and who are those people that we allow in. At this level too, I begun to view the ramp as symptomatic of control imposed upon people with disabilities by a society that does not fully accept them. Under the guise of providing access, a society can systematically limit or censor access, purposefully determining areas of access and conversely determining areas that would remain inaccessible.

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